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ABSTRACT

The world's appetite for the development of more television programs is constantly on the rise. Yet the manner in which television programs are produced for international viewers is still casual and often careless. Neither the message nor the way in which the medium shapes the message take into account the basic cultural barriers that cause communication difficulties. Studies on intercultural communication have revealed that cross-cultural barriers such as people's attitudes; their social organization; their patterns of thoughts; the roles and role expectations they have; their language; and their sense of space, time, and non-verbal expressions must be considered by media communicators. Also, knowing television's idiosyncratic nature, its unique features, and its specific components, and understanding the grammar and syntax of television will aid in the production of better, less casual, and more cohesive television programs. Problems imposed by careless television programming are being considered more and more by major international agencies and governments, and scholarly works on the subject are now being more frequently published. Modern technology and advancements in television hardware now allow television producers to generate programs with a broader, more international scope, greater aesthetic value, and artistic balance, and which are directly related to the needs of the inhabitants of the global village. Television software for people of various cultures should be produced and broadcast by the various channels now available. (MM)

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MEDIA SOFTWARE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CROSS-CULTURAL TELEVISION PROGRAMMING

by

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MEDIA SOFTWARE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CROSS-CULTURAL TELEVISION PROGRAMMING

Abstract

The world's appetite for the development of more television programs is constantly on the rise. Television spectators around the world outnumber those who depend on other media for their information and entertainment. The number of television viewing hours is also increasing. Yet, the manner in which television programs are produced is still casual and often careless. This short essay addresses itself to the issue of designing television programs for international mass consumption in accordance with the medium's own grammar, syntax, and composition.

Media Software: The Development of Cross-Cultural Television Programming

Cable television and satellite broadcasting are providing an enormous amount of television programming. Televised messages of all sorts--news, soap operas, police stories, situation comedies, etc., are reaching all parts of the world regardless of the level of understanding of the receivers. The appetite for more programming is increasing as more and more channels are available to all nations. However, the processes involved in producing television programs for international viewers is still done in a rather casual and often careless manner. In most programs, neither the message, nor the way in which the medium shapes the message take into account the basic cultural barriers that cause communication difficulties. Even the most popular of these programs such as "Dallas" are pure reflections of the particular society and the people who create them.

Studies on intercultural communication have revealed that cross-cultural barriers such as peoples' attitudes, their social organization, their patterns of thoughts, the roles and role expectations they have, their language, their sense of space, time, and non-verbal expressions (Porter, 1972, pp. 3-18), must be considered by media communicators. Studies on television composition have shown that the medium is not a mere carrier of the message. The medium dictates the message. It reshapes, reorganizes, and restructures the materials and makes up the message in accordance with the rules of composition pertinent only to the medium itself (Zettl, 1980; Metallinos, 1985). Finally, studies on visual literacy suggest that basic knowledge and understanding of the grammar, the syntax, and the composition of pictures not only by the producers,

but also by the receivers, is a prerequisite for the development of programs intended for people of different cultures (Lent, 1980).

Regardless of these studies, we continue to develop television programs of limited scope and dubious artistic merit, often unrelated to the needs of the viewers these programs reach when they cross the borders of the country in which they were produced. This problem will continue unless we recognize the necessity of establishing some guidelines for the creation of media software for international mass consumption. This paper suggests such guidelines by examining these three key issues:

1. The medium of television is unique in its'own right and it has a language of its'own. Hense, it requires knowledge and understanding if it is to communicate properly.

2. It is possible to eliminate cross-cultural barriers by developing appropriate television programming which take into account such barriers.

3. Television producers have the technology and the know-how to design television programs for international mass consumption which will have a broader scope and artistic merit, and which will relate to the needs of their particular viewers.

The Idiosyncracies of Television

Television's idiosyncratic nature, its' unique features, and its' specific components, have been studied by several scholars of the medium (Tarroni, 1979; Zettl, 1983). It has been established after considerable experimentation and verification, that the process of selecting, producing, and presenting materials for television programs is not the same as that used in video, radio, film, or theatre (Metallinos, 1985). Each of these media

might have some elements common to television, but they are different media which operate with their own instruments, apply their own techniques, and use their own materials (Tarroni, 1979). Often, television program producers fail to recognize these distinctions. For example, instructional or educational television programs for cross-cultural consumption still utilize film techniques inappropriate to television. Visual materials are used which cannot be understood by the viewers. They think that the perceptual differences between a zoom-in as opposed to a dolly-in will make no difference to the uninformed viewer. But it does make a difference.

Television's distinctive features, such as its' small screen size, its' means of viewing, its' fast-paced events, immediacy, informality of viewing, intimacy, its' ability for instant replay, slow motion, or accelerated actions, also have been underlined and studied by various scholars (Millerson, 1972; Toogood, 1978; Zettl, 1978). Such features, however, are sometimes abused rather than utilized properly in television programs. Take, for example, the small size of the television screen and the production restrictions dictated by this small size. Close-ups, which are required, are often inappropriate, uncalled for, and redundant.

Television's specific components such as lights, cameras, switchers, audio, etc., have undergone revolutionary technological advancement during the last ten years. Digital television has almost entirely replaced analogical television, and computerized imagery has surpassed all expectations. The fast pace at which television production technology is advancing has produced alarm among visual communication scholars. Some fear that a great deal of new production equipment (such as television's special effects capabilities) does

not really add to the aesthetics of the television image or the overall program when used redundantly. Rather, they disturb the viewer (Zettl, 1986; Metallinos, 1987). When television programs with extensive use of such special effects as flip-flops, echo effects, digital bounce effects, and fly effects (to mention only a few) cross borders, it is most likely they will not be understood. Such visual effects might be good attention getters, but their communicative purpose and artistic merit are dubious (Metallinos, 1987).

In summary, knowing television's idiosyncratic nature, its' unique features, and its' specific components, and understanding the grammar and the syntax of television, and utilizing them accordingly, will aid in the production of better, less casual, and more cohesive television programs.

Cross-Cultural Barriers and Television Programs

Various scholars, mostly anthropologists and sociologists, have studied the means by which media, and particularly television, can overcome the serious obstacles, the barriers, that separate one culture from another. Among them, Cook (1980), Deregowski (1972), and Mangan (1978), to mention only a few, have suggested a number of ways in which many of the cross-cultural barriers mentioned earlier can be eliminated. Mangan (1978, p. 261), for example, suggests that:

> The point has been made that different traditions entail differences in view and depiction. On the other hand, people can easily learn new styles of depiction. Not only that. Their own indigenous lore may even enable them to correctly understand even very complex and potentially confusing visual material from alien cultures.

Cook (1980, p. 11), who has identified various barriers of cross-cultural

picture communication, is optimistic about the way television pictures, and consequently television programming, can be used to remove these barriers, and states that:

> Although these problems exist today, dynamic forces in daily living are leading to their eventual minimization. The primary factors in this process are formal education, literacy education, experience with pictures and contact with cultures that involve experience with pictures.

Gattegno (1969) is also optimistic about the possibility of television surpassing the existing cross-cultural barriers, advocating visual literacy and education as means to achieve it. The development of such know disciplines as visual literacy, semiotics, and visual communication is an indication of the need for cross-cultural communication. The efforts undertaken by UNESCO to develop Third World visual literacy (1978) using broadcasting was a first and very wise step taken in this direction. We now see that numerous governments pay special attention to the type of television programming entering their countries, while some request specialized programming (edited versions of popular ones) such as Sesame Street. Yet others invite television production experts to instruct them in developing television programs.

In summary, we can safely state that the problems imposed by casual and careless television programming are being considered more and more by major international agencies and governments, and scholarly works on the subject are now being more frequently published.

Television Software for International Consumption

In an information age such as ours, it becomes increasingly important to open the channels of communication, allowing information to flow freely among all nations of the world. The world's economic, social, and political stability depends on that free flow of information and undisturbed communication. And it is here that television is asked to play an important role. Television program producers are asked not only to produce diversified programming, but, foremost, to provide programs with an international audience in mind. Through the many satellite channels available, they are asked to broadcast programs with a much broader scope than previously expected. For example, a television program broadcasting international news should be created with such care that there is no bias in the visual materials used. Today, globally known American television networks provide nightly international news stemming from the point of view of the American television network system and the particular newscaster's own view. Such programs are inappropriate for international consumption because their content is often one-sided and the symbols used are not easily understood.

Television program producers could place greater emphasis on the production quality of some of these programs. An example experienced by many is the case of public affairs and documentary programs produced occasionally in the case of an international disaster or crisis. Put together at the last minute, such programs often lack balance or accuracy and often provide striking examples of sloppy picture composition. Forced by the need to have the program on the air faster than their competitors, they put together visuals and narratives hastily. The technology and the know-how is there. There is no reason why such unprepared and unbalanced programs should be broadcast

internationally.

Television program producers of the information age have to consider the needs of the viewers to whom the programs are addressed. Such viewers are diversified and in vast numbers across the globe. Obviously, only limited programs can be of such a universal nature that they can be perceived and understood by all people equally across various cultures. Yet, there are numerous issues which are of paramount importance to all people of all cultures such as nuclear war, world energy shortages, international market fluctuations, etc. Programs dealing with these topics meet the demands of all people. They provide them with essential and necessary information. Such television programming can and should be provided. But how often do we experience such programming?

In summary, television software for people of various cultures should be produced and broadcasted by the various channels available. They should be much broader in scope. They should be more carefully and artistically produced. Finally, they should try to meet the needs and the interests of their viewers.

Conclusions

The question imposed in this short paper was whether or not we can design software for international viewers. The discussion revealed that the designing of programming for people of cross-cultures should be based on the following basic principles:

1. Television is a unique medium in its' own right, and, consequently, only specific and particular materials can be used in its' programming.

2. The cross-cultural barriers inherent in international communication

through television can be eliminated through the systematic education and study of visual literacy which can be taught by television itself.

3. Modern technology and advancements in television hardware now allow television producers to generate programs with a broader, more international scope, greater aesthetic value, and artistic balance, and which are directly related to the needs of the inhabitants of the global village.

Television is both the most powerful communication medium ever developed, and the most effective medium for reaching a great number of people simultaneously. If we all realize the immediate need we have to establish and to follow these guidelines in creating software for cross-cultural communication, we will all be doing a great service to ourselves, to our fellow citizens of other cultures, and to the world we live in.

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